

News

CMC head slams secrecy

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QUEENSLAND'S chief corruption fighter has warned that more public agencies will escape scrutiny and accountability because of a State Government policy.

In a stinging attack, Crime and Misconduct Commission boss Robert Needham has hit out at the Government for removing more government-owned corporations from its jurisdiction.

At a time when News Ltd - the publisher of *The Courier-Mail* - and other media outlets have warned of a trend by governments to whittle away freedom of speech and access to information, Mr Needham has used his annual report to raise concerns about the accountability of GOCs.

Tabled yesterday, Mr Needham's foreword also revealed how fewer employers who worked for government-owned corporations would be covered by whistleblower protection laws. The State Government owns 18 GOCs valued at more than \$22 billion.

They include Tarong Energy, Energex, Port of Brisbane and SunWater.

In a testy 12 months for the CMC, in which three Beattie Government ministers were separately charged, Mr Needham warned that if the CMC were not given powers to scrutinise GOCs, then public accountability could be eroded.

We are conscious that if we are to remain effective in our independent watchdog role over the longer term, the mandate and capability of the CMC must keep pace with continuing change in our society," he said.

Mr Needham was concerned about "a growing government trend to covert some public agencies to government-owned corporations".

"More worryingly still, recent amendments to the Government Owned Corporations Act 1993 disclose the Government's intention that all statutory GOCs - currently under the CMC's jurisdiction - will convert to being corporate GOCs.

"This means that the CMC will not have the power to investigate these agencies. Neither the Whistleblowers Protection Act 1994 will apply."

He said that he acknowledged it might make commercial sense for some public agencies to become corporate GOCs.

"However, I am strongly of the view that private entities that carry out public functions should be subject to scrutiny by the CMC, especially where public funding is involved," he said.

"Without any corresponding changes to our powers there is considerable potential for public accountability to be eroded."

A spokesman for Premier Anna Bligh did not return *The Courier-Mail's* call yesterday.

<http://www.news.com.au/couriermail/story/0,23739,22761200-3102,00.html>